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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001837

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SUBJECT: SIGNATURE APPEALS UPDATE: MAY 27

REF: CARACAS 1799

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor,
for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) The signature appeals process formally began on May 27, with armed forces and National Electoral Council (CNE) workers mounting the 2,607 appeals centers throughout Venezuela (centers will be open to the public May 28-30). Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel on May 27 characterized an editorial by WHA A/S Roger Noriega as an "open, flagrant, and deliberate provocation." Rangel also renewed allegations that OAS chief observer Fernando Jaramillo is biased against the GOV and issued an ultimatum that either SYG Gaviria remove Jaramillo or the OAS observer mission could not continue. Rangel and the armed forces reaffirmed the CNE's ban on information centers to be set up near appeals sites. The opposition called on the CNE and armed forces to act objectively during the appeals, and demanded the right to audit appeals materials when centers open to the public. End summary.

Appeals Process Set-Up Begins

12. (U) The five-day period for the signature appeals in the recall referendum process against President Hugo Chavez formally began on May 27. National Electoral Council (CNE) workers and the armed forces, under its Plan Republica to support electoral events, readied the 2,607 appeals centers for the three days (May 28-30) in which the centers will be open to the public. The centers are scheduled to open at 6 a.m. and remain open a total of 12 hours per day (or, on the last day, until lines are depleted). More than 100 international observers under the auspices of the OAS and Carter Center (TCC) deployed around the country.

GOV Blasts Noriega, OAS Observer

13. (U) On May 26, CNE Director Jorge Rodriguez rejected the op-ed piece by WHA A/S Roger Noriega accusing the GOV of impeding the referendum process. Rodriguez dismissed the comments as "interference from an illegitimate government" and countered with allegations of irregularities in the election of President Bush. On May 27, Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel excoriated Noriega's piece as an "open, flagrant, and deliberate attempt at provocation" and as evidence of an imperious policy toward Venezuela and the rest of the world. Rangel, too, questioned the legitimacy of the Bush administration and then accused the USG of hypocrisy in its human rights policy, showing for reporters the photos of abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Rangel said the GOV plans to complain officially to the Department of State as well as via its missions to the OAS and the UN. He also said the GOV will not recognize the U.S. as a member of the Group of Friends.

14. (U) Rangel also reiterated charges of bias against OAS Chief of Staff Fernando Jaramillo. Rangel linked Jaramillo's "highly suspicious" behavior and the Noriega op-ed piece. The Vice President said the GOV will not recognize any OAS report with Jaramillo's name. Rangel claimed to have called SYG Cesar Gaviria on May 26 after reading the article and insisted that Gaviria disassociate himself from Noriega's comments and remove Jaramillo immediately. Rangel said he issued the ultimatum that either Jaramillo leave or the OAS would not be welcome as international observers. In press reports on May 27, SYG Gaviria expressed his continued support for Jaramillo.

Plan Republica

15. (U) General Julio Quintero, head of the Unified Military Command (CUFAN), told reporters May 26 the armed forces would not permit the installation of information centers as banned by the CNE May 26. He said the armed forces would deploy 45,000 soldiers to support the appeals centers and transport the appeals materials under "Plan Republica." Carter Center representative Francisco Diez, however, questioned during a press conference May 27 whether the CNE had actually prohibited the centers. Vice President Rangel affirmed that information centers would not be permitted. Coordinadora Democratica (CD) advisor Jorge Casado told PolCouns May 22 that they planned to go ahead with the centers. In their view, the restriction on keeping them indoors was to the Coordinadora's advantage because the authorities ostensibly would need warrants to enter private premises.

Opposition Seeks Assurances of Fair Play

16. (C) Opposition spokespersons outlined May 27 three demands of the GOV during the appeals. First, the CD wants to be able to audit the appeals registers ("cuadernos") when the centers open to assure their accuracy as well as to assure the quality of the indelible ink used to mark the pinkie fingers of those who make appeals. Second, the CD called upon the armed forces to perform their duty and not impede opposition efforts to collect the appeals. Finally, the CD asked for the CNE to maintain clear rules of the game, especially during the verification stage after the appeals.

Comment

17. (C) The centers of information will probably be the first major dispute when the appeals centers open. The GOV no doubt sees the centers as the backbone of the opposition's organization for the appeals and wants to eliminate them. The CNE did not issue a resolution to decide the matter, but it is clear the intention is not to allow the information centers. Rangel's railing against the OAS is a policy of bluster. SYG Gaviria, fortunately, seems to be firm in not giving in to it.
SHAPIRO

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